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ABSTRACT

The ability to read fluently and make use of text is crucial for all learners. The training of secondary teachers, however, takes almost no account of this. Reading skills develop and change as the individual meets new situations and demands throughout life. Reading should be understood as a complex process of making meaning from text, for a variety of purposes and in a wide range of contexts. A study examined perceptions of reading in view of growing anecdotal evidence of an increase in students arriving in secondary schools without basic reading skills, i.e., unable to extract any meaning from written text. Also, the two researchers, as leaders of teacher inservice courses, wanted to gain a clearer understanding of what teachers in the secondary school need to know about the reading process and the teaching of reading skills. The sample was one S1 class and all the teachers who taught it in three secondary schools--a pilot study in a fourth school generated data before the main data collection. In the main phase, 34 teachers of all subjects were surveyed (and 67 students). In the vast majority of the questionnaire responses and interviews there was clear evidence of teachers' awareness of the central importance of reading to children's learning. Of the 34 teachers, 24 thought that reading is taught and 31 that it should be taught. Most teachers were concerned that they knew little about reading. They feel the need for more support and training in how to develop students' reading skills. (NKA)

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Squeezing-Out the Juice

Perceptions of Reading in the Secondary School

Jenny Allan and Annette Bruton

"Well... I ask 'what was that telling me?' ... I'd have to try to find a way to squeeze the juice from the text, which is what I was taught when I was young... You've got to give [the children] strategies for extracting the juice, so they won't panic and give up..." (Teacher of modern languages)

This research was carried out with one first year class in three secondary schools. The purpose was to help the authors, both actively engaged with teaching reading at this level, to prepare in-service materials. The work was awarded joint first prize in the SCRE Practitioner Awards for 1996.

Since before the Bullock Report *A Language for Life* (DES, 1975) there has been an awareness that an understanding of the ways in which children use language to learn is vital for all teachers – not just those in primary schools. Clearly, the ability to read fluently and make use of text is crucial for all learners. However, the training of secondary teachers takes almost no account of this.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'READING'?

It is important to clarify what is meant by 'reading' and 'teaching reading'. In our view, reading cannot be regarded as simply a set of mechanical skills to be learned once and for all, but rather as a complex process of making meaning from text, for a variety of purposes and in a wide range of contexts. *Taking a Closer Look at Reading* explains it thus:

Above all, it is important to help pupils to realise, from the beginning, that reading is a purposeful activity involving a search for meaning. It also calls upon previous experience of life and of reading, and uses clues from the context and specific purpose of the activity, as well as from the text itself, to help 'make the meaning'. (SCRE 1995, p3)

Reading skills develop and change as the individual meets new situations and demands, throughout life. Another major issue is that of reading context and purpose. It is quite well established that, for example, the particular reading demands of the geography curriculum cannot be met in English lessons; they must be taught in the geography class. 'Teaching reading', therefore, must surely involve supporting the development of these skills in each new context, and making explicit those strategies which will allow a range of kinds of writing. An earlier project (Bruton et al) supported the view that skills learned in withdrawal groups do not transfer into other contexts without systematic reinforcement (1993). This is also supported by Britton in the Bullock Report, and, most recently, in Harrison's review (1996) of the most recent research on reading.

The two researchers in this project, one a principal teacher of English and the other a regional adviser for learning support, had three main reasons for seeking to find out more about this topic. First, it seems that there is growing anecdotal evidence of an increase in pupils arriving in S1 without basic reading skills, ie, unable to decode print or to extract any meaning from written text. Since the training of secondary teachers does not include the teaching of reading, or strategies for supporting reading development, many teachers had been heard to express considerable disquiet about this problem. How widespread is this perception? What do teachers see as the reasons for this? In the secondary school, the kinds of reading required in order to ensure full access to today's crowded curriculum are many and varied; are these strategies apparent to pupils? If they are not, are they taught? In all subjects, there are new skills needed at each level, and a continuing need for established skills to be revisited in the new contexts that the pupil encounter. (DES, 1975). Do teachers act on this?

Secondly, as leaders of in-service courses for teachers, we wanted to gain a clearer understanding of what teachers in the secondary school need to know about the reading process and the teaching of reading skills if they are to cope with these changing demands. How well do the courses they, we and others offer meet the needs that teachers see themselves as having in this area? Are these courses sufficient to support the implementation of the regional reading policy? Finally, we are currently working with another colleague to write in-service support packs for schools to use independently. This study was designed to provide us with information that would help us with this.

Having worked together to devise and deliver in-service courses on reading in the secondary school we were aware that many of our colleagues had concerns about reading. Most of those at the courses were teachers of English or learning support but we thought that it would

be useful to teachers of all subjects, in order to find out how well our courses might meet the needs of such teachers we decided to investigate their views.

THE STUDY

The research questions were: What do teachers know about reading? What do they need to know? What are their concerns about reading in the classroom? How do they think reading is taught? What are pupils' perceptions of reading, at school and at home? What are pupils' perceptions of the ways in which reading is used across the curriculum, and who do they think helps them with it? We were unable to find much published work which addressed any of these questions; most of the research into reading seems to focus upon initial reading skills and the teaching of reading in the primary sector. Most of the work carried out in secondary schools seems to be concerned with failing or struggling readers or with quite narrowly focused issues such as the ways in which pupils use diagrams in their study of school texts (Moore *et al*, 1993).

In addition to the work of Britton *et al* in the Bullock report we did find some pieces of research relevant to our research focus: Meek's longitudinal study of adolescents learning to read addresses many issues about the reading curriculum in the secondary school. (Meek, 1988.) The earlier work of Lunzer and Gardner (1975), dealing with the use of reading for transactional purposes is relevant to many of the concerns raised by teachers in this study. Harrison's review of recent research into the teaching and development of reading provides a useful context for many of the issues raised here.

It was decided that the sample would be one S1 class and all of the teachers who taught it in three secondary schools. There was a pilot study in a fourth school before the main data collection. In the main phase, we surveyed a total of 34 teachers covering all subjects, and 67 pupils. The first stage involved the circulation of teacher and pupil questionnaires. These contained target specific questions plus a few designed to allow comparison of perceptions of related topics across the two groups of subjects. In this way we hoped to consider the broad areas of concern across the schools. There were follow-up interviews to allow us to take a closer look at teacher and pupil perceptions and explore the reasons for some of these with six pupils and four teachers at each school. Pupils were chosen to represent ability spread within the sample and gender mix. Following feedback from the pilot, it was decided to interview the pupils in groups of three, all boys or all girls. The teachers included English and a learning support specialist. Choices were made on the basis of questionnaire responses and availability of interviewees.

It is worth noting that a few of the teachers who were asked to complete questionnaires were rather unsure about doing so and that several of those asked for an interview were reluctant and apparently felt rather insecure about the topic. Comments noted in the researcher's field

notebook after a conversation with two such teachers indicated that they felt –

"exposed somehow ... I wasn't sure what some questions [on the form] meant... what you were wanting to know... what the answers should be... don't understand reading enough to make much comment ... it made me feel inadequate..."

The schools in the main phase were: School A, an inner-city school of 650 pupils, with an ability spread weighted towards the lower end; school B, larger (900) and situated in a fairly affluent part of the city, had a much greater proportion of high achievers; and school C, on the edge of a small country town, quite small (475) and having a broad social and academic mix in its intake. The pilot school was a large (1100) suburban school with an academically and socially comprehensive intake. We chose schools which would provide as representative a sample of the population being studied as was possible, within the practical constraints faced by a PT English and an adviser for learning support and special needs, who had to fit their research in around their professional commitments.

FINDINGS

What we are reporting here is action research carried out in three schools. Whilst we do not claim that these three can represent all Scottish secondary schools, or that our findings can be generalised to all schools, we do think that the results of our study are interesting and illuminating and that people in all secondary schools should be asking to what extent our findings might be valid for their situation.

► Teachers in secondary schools are concerned about reading.

In the vast majority of our questionnaire responses and interviews there was clear evidence of teachers' awareness of the central importance of reading to children's learning, and of its value in all our lives.

The first four questions sought views on:

- whether reading is taught in the secondary school
- who teaches it
- how they teach it and
- whether it should be taught.

Of our 34 teachers, 24 thought that it is taught and 31 that it should be. Opinions about who teaches reading were mixed: 15 teachers thought that the English department was solely or mainly responsible for teaching reading at present, 9 wrote that learning support staff (LSS) were, but 17 took the view that all teachers teach reading to some extent. Asked who *should* teach reading, 23 people thought that English or LSS should take the major role, but 22 said that all teachers should contribute towards this.

These results were not surprising to us but we are concerned about them. In our contact with teachers from all parts of Scotland and elsewhere we have often heard the view that developing reading and language skills is the

responsibility of English and learning support teachers, who, it is said, should give pupils the skills that would allow other teachers to deliver the content of their subjects.

► **Many teachers have considerable knowledge and understanding of how to develop reading skills in their pupils, but much of this has not been made explicit.**

Questions about the skills needed and problems encountered in relation to teachers' own curricular subjects elicited a variety of responses but, as Table 1 shows, there were clear areas of consensus. 'Comprehension' emerges as one of the main ways in which reading is thought to be taught, one of the key skills in most subjects and a major area of difficulty in many. Interestingly, the most frequent difficulty identified (Table 2) is not named as comprehension, but rather as some variation of the notion of difficulty in recognising, understanding and applying the vocabulary specific to the subject.

Table 1: What kinds of reading skills do S1/2 pupils need for your subject? (Number of responses)

Comprehension	21	Others	
Vocabulary/spelling	11	diagrams	3
Reading for information	14	computer screens	5
Reading instructions	14	problem solving	5
		analysis	6

Table 2: What are the major reading problems met by pupils in your subject? (Number of responses)

Vocabulary/ technical language	24	Other	
Comprehension	15	slowness	3
Note-taking	12	fluency	3
Lack of confidence	17	poor concentration	5

In the follow-up interviews with some of the teachers it became very clear that in many cases they know what works in the development of reading skills even if they don't always know why it works. One modern languages teacher explained the importance of phonological awareness very clearly, although she did not use that term. Two teachers within one school, having apologised for their lack of knowledge about reading matters, provided clear descriptions of collaborative text-tackling strategies used in their classrooms which would easily fit into the approach advocated by Lunzer and Gardner; although they – and the other teachers who used some of these strategies – did not use the term DARTs (directed activities related to texts) they were clearly aware that this kind of active engagement with text is highly effective for readers at every level.

Strategies such as text highlighting, sequencing, prediction, cloze procedure and text completion, says Harrison, '...make public an externalisation of the internal processes of reading, from which a less fluent reader can observe and learn.' They also reinforce the skills of the more able reader working in a group, as one teacher put it: 'The helper may learn more than the learner, because they had to articulate their ideas for someone else.'

In discussing her own strategies for tackling difficult text and then going on to say how she might apply her experience of reading difficulties to her teaching, Jane, a teacher of modern languages, got right to the heart of the matter:

"Well... I ask 'what was that telling me?' Before going on ... I'd have to try to find a way to squeeze the juice from the text, which is what I was taught when I was young... You've got to give [the children] strategies for extracting the juice, so they won't panic and give up...."

► **Many teachers doubt their competence to deal with reading needs in their subject.**

With a couple of exceptions, the teachers who agreed to be interviewed began by making jokey, disparaging or disarmingly frank comments about their own lack of expertise or feelings of insecurity when asked to talk about reading issues. Asked in the questionnaire whether they felt able to meet the reading needs of their pupils, 24 teachers replied that they did not, 6 said they did and 4 did not reply. Several people wrote qualifying comments beside their answers, pointing out that they lacked training or that they were doing their best but didn't know much about it.

► **Some teachers have worrying misconceptions about reading.**

Many teachers' beliefs paralleled what the press tells us all from time to time – that reading standards are falling, and literacy is under threat from recent changes in children's behaviour, caused mainly by television, video or computers. A sample of the comments made include:

"Children don't read at all outside school..."

"More focused reading programmes in PRIMARY school are what's needed..."

"Most kids reach basic literacy, but few are going much beyond that..."

"I need to concentrate on the content of my subject ... haven't time to do this..."

"TV, video and computers are destroying reading..."

The most recent evidence of attainment in reading available to teachers two years ago – when we conducted our research – indicated that standards had not fallen (SOED, 1992). Whether this will be the case in the impending AAP report on English Language remains to be seen. The responses of the pupils we surveyed completely contradict their teachers' views of their reading habits – they nominate stories as their favourite type of reading.

Is it perhaps the case that we are imposing our view of what is 'proper' reading on children? Could we perhaps build upon the newer kinds of reading? Meek is interesting on this point: We are extending to everyone the possibilities of becoming more literate in ways that have no precedent, related to technology, storage and retrieval of information by computer and in relation to television – a relation that is much more subtle than is generally admitted. (Meek p6, our italics.)

► **There are interesting parallels between teachers as readers and their pupils.**

In the Bullock Report Britton pointed out that although we are expert readers who have mastered the academic genres, our skills are automatic and we are not usually aware of HOW we do what we're doing when we read. He suggested that this explicit awareness is necessary.

In the responses to our questionnaires and interview questions there are clear parallels between the teachers and their pupils in a few areas: what they like to read; what they find hard or unpleasant about reading; what they do when they meet a challenge or difficulty; the ways in which they 'translate' from unfamiliar contexts or language; and the ways in which they collaborate. Reflecting upon these parallels could help teachers to deal with the challenges they meet in developing reading in the classroom.

Table 3: Parallels in reading preferences (Number of responses)

<i>Teachers: Your reading for pleasure?</i>	
Fiction	25
Non-fiction	14
Papers/magazines	16
Teletext, computer screen	12
<i>Pupils: I like to read...</i>	
Storybooks/novels	57
Magazines	56
Comics	38
Papers	30
Information books	18

There is one further parallel, which has to do with confidence. A lack of confidence in their own ability to learn is observable in many struggling readers. Many of our teachers – even those whose descriptions of their work demonstrate an implicit understanding of the ways in which reading skills can be developed – were not at all confident in their own ability to discuss these issues, let alone deal with the difficulties they perceived themselves as facing. Might this at least partially explain the high number of those we spoke to who still do not accept that the teaching and development of reading should be their concern?

► **Secondary teachers feel the need for more support and training how to develop pupils' reading skills.**

In responding to the questionnaire, 24 of our 34 teachers said that they were unable to provide the help and support that pupils need within their subject. In our interviews, the experience of reflecting upon their classroom practice and their own reading strategies quite quickly helped many of the teachers to understand that their knowledge was greater than they had thought. For themselves as well as their pupils, some thought that the collaborative approach was the way forward, as one history teacher remarked:

"...Somebody comes up with a bit of an idea and somebody else comes up with something else, and you put

it together. I think that kind of working together with someone else who is perhaps more professionally aware than you about issues such as reading is ideal."

Two other teachers mentioned their wish to engage with the theory of reading development, which they thought should be included in initial teacher training.

We are inclined to agree with Harrison that the teacher is more important than the method, and that the provision of opportunities for reflection and sharing of experience is essential. He describes such professional development as 'critical' for teachers... "it may produce greater gains than improving methods or schemes."

► **Worksheets and textbooks are the most common types of reading encountered by pupils.**

This type of material far outweighed any other type. This may explain the frequency with which teachers nominated comprehension as a skill needed or problem encountered in their subject. In interviews, the pupils expressed great distaste for much of this 'duty' reading, and described their shortcuts through it. Clearly, engagement with text and the making of meaning are not a strong feature of such encounters with written material.

Table 4: 'I read...' – Pupils' responses (Number of responses)

	a lot	sometimes	hardly ever	never
at school	47	24	0	0
worksheets	42	25	1	0
textbooks	43	20	4	0
my own work	15	39	10	1
my partners' work	1	35	24	3
notices	6	35	24	2
out loud	3	28	31	5
off the board	5	14	40	1
in the library	5	14	40	7

► **Pupils find noise the single greatest disincentive to reading, they prefer to read when alone.**

The noise issue came up quite strongly in two of our written questions. In interviews, pupils described the frustration of attempting to read in a noisy classroom amidst distractions; 'at home, in my bed' was often mentioned as the best reading environment.

► **If they see themselves as in need of help with reading, pupils are most likely to turn to family or friends and least likely to ask the learning support teacher.**

This finding was very clear in both questionnaire and interview responses; it was a shock to us. Pupils described the learning support teacher as someone who "...comes into the class for this one particular person..." Of the list of choices offered for this question, very few ticked the 'teacher in learning centre' option. Perhaps they are not aware that help is available if asked for? It seems to us that there is an important issue for schools here; perhaps a further study might look into this in greater detail.

IMPLICATIONS

In this study a number of parallels emerged between the teachers' and the pupils' perception of the reading process. This seemed to offer a useful starting point for the way forward. Teachers' concerns were reflected in what they said about the kinds of difficulties that their pupils experienced in making sense of text for which they had no context. Interestingly when asked to identify the type of text which they found most onerous they described the same difficulties for themselves that they had identified in their pupils. This was one of a number of parallels which pointed to the value of using teachers' own experience as readers to help them to teach reading in their own classrooms. Another key parallel between teachers' and pupils' descriptions of how they deal with difficulties lies in their use of collaboration. One teacher provided a vivid illustration of how working with another person allows reflection. Pupils echo this by describing the way in which an intermediary is sometimes needed to help you make any meaning from the text.

Most teachers in our study were concerned that they knew little about reading. They felt they were ill equipped to deal with the kind of classroom problems they described. However during the course of this study many teachers discovered that they knew more about the reading process than they thought. As Harrison points out in his review of the research on the methods of teaching reading, some of the most effective reading strategies are those which externalise a usually internal process. If by reflecting upon the ways in which they solve problems in their own reading teachers can make some of these strategies explicit for pupils then we can begin to develop a practical approach to teaching and improving reading in secondary classrooms. This could be done within a department, across a whole school or within local authority in-service courses.

Our experience of teaching, in-service education, meetings and conferences had mostly accorded with the view expressed by Britton, Harrison and others: that the most important factor in reading success is the teacher and not the choice of method. We did not find anything to contradict this assertion. Two important points emerged here. First, many teachers we spoke to did not see the teaching and development of reading as their responsibility – despite the strong emphasis on this and other aspects of language across the curriculum in all local and national

policy documents. In our interviews, there is some evidence to suggest that one reason for this attitude is teachers' feeling that they don't know how to begin to talk about reading. This seems strange when one considers that our interviews also provide evidence of considerable knowledge and understanding of what works in the development of reading across subjects. We seek to encourage teachers to recognise that they have a valuable contribution to make to the reading debate. Second, although initiatives such as the Lothian Region policy on reading in the secondary school and the subsequent development of in-service courses are very helpful, it is still the case that in most areas of Scotland there is little support for teachers' professional development in this crucial area. If current initiatives concerned with improving reading are to succeed in the secondary school, we must ensure that staff development programmes provide opportunities for teachers to explore and share what they know explicitly and implicitly about the reading process. In this as in other things, to succeed, teachers must become confident in their own competence.

We are most grateful to all those teachers and pupils who participated in the research. Further information: Lenny Allan, English Department, Liberton High School, Gilmerton Road, Edinburgh or Annette Bruton, Higher Still Development Unit, Moray House Institute of Education, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh.

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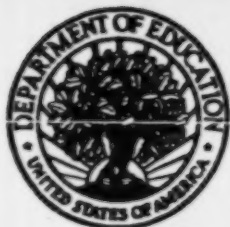


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